How much sleep do teens need?

We all need sleep. But our sleep needs change as we grow up. Adults need somewhere between 7 to 9 hours of sleep per night. Teenagers need around 8 to 10 hours of sleep per night. And younger children, toddlers, and infants need even more sleep. In fact, in the first few months of life, babies spend more time asleep than they do awake!

Would letting teens sleep in longer really help them do better in school and life?

Research suggests yes—more sleep will help teens do better and feel better. Getting enough sleep is important for teens’ mental and physical health, and these are vital to doing well in school and sports. There are other benefits of later school start times. When schools start later, teens are more likely to show up for school. One school district that adopted a later school start policy saw a 25-percent reduction in student absences. Not surprisingly, studies also show that teens who are allowed to sleep more do better in school.

What happens when teens don’t get enough sleep?

The fact that teens, kids, and babies need more sleep than adults shows how critical sleep is to human development. Sleep affects almost everything about us.

Your brain: Sleep loss makes it more difficult to concentrate. It becomes harder to remember things and to pay attention. It is not surprising that teens who don’t get enough sleep don’t do as well in school. Sleep loss also affects emotions. One study of nearly 30,000 high school students showed that each hour of lost sleep was associated with a 38-percent increased risk of feeling sad or hopeless.
Melatonin is a hormone that our brain releases to tell the body it is time to sleep. Research shows that sleep loss is linked with an increased risk of getting sick. Without enough sleep, for example, you might find yourself getting a cold more easily than others. People who are not sleeping enough are also more likely to have to have more-serious health problems, such as obesity, heart disease, and diabetes. Athletes who don’t sleep enough tend to get hurt more easily and take longer to recover. In fact, almost all professional athletic teams and elite athletes have sleep coaches or programs to help them maximize their sleep and improve athletic performance.

Why don’t teens get enough sleep?
There is a clash between human hormones and public policy, believe it or not. Teenagers have sleep cycles that are different from those of adults and children. Melatonin, known as the “hormone of darkness,” is a hormone that tells us when it is time to sleep. Adults and younger children generally start to feel tired around 9:00 at night. This is when their bodies start releasing melatonin. Teens’ bodies are different. They start pumping out melatonin later, at about 11:00 at night. Their bodies keep releasing high levels of melatonin well into the morning. This means that teenagers are literally programmed to stay awake later and sleep in later.

However, most schools start around 8:00 in the morning or earlier. Early school start times have a direct effect on how much—or, really, how little—sleep American teens are getting. So, here’s the problem: Teenagers’ bodies are telling them to stay awake later and sleep in later. But they need to get to school at 8:00 a.m., five days a week! That can mean that they go to school tired. As a result, sometimes teenagers are not able to do their best. This is a public policy issue because school districts set policies about what time school should start.

What can teens do to improve sleep on their own?
We all could all do better if we limited our use of cell phones and computers at bedtime. Science also shows us why this is so. The blue light coming from electronic devices prevents our bodies from releasing melatonin. We know that teenagers’ release of melatonin is already delayed, and the content consumed on social devices can also make it difficult to fall asleep. Using technology before bedtime can make it even harder to fall asleep.
References and additional sources of information


